

This Gospel may cause us to wince as we hear it. Jesus speaks clearly against divorce, that it is contrary to God's original plan for us and that it existed in his time, only as a concession for the fallen nature of human beings. It causes us to wince because most every one of us are touched by the effects of divorce. All sorts of people we love have had a marriage that resulted in divorce, and undoubtedly some of us in this room have had a marriage that ended in divorce, whether we pursued it or instead wanted to preserve it.

My point is not to poke anyone's sore spots or cast shame on anyone, but instead to remind ourselves of a beautiful, albeit difficult, ideal our Lord still holds for us. After Jesus makes this declaration, he goes on to speak of the ideal of marriage: that *God made them male and female...and the two shall become one flesh...*and finally, that *what God has joined together, no human being must separate*.

It's not coincidental that immediately after this teaching on marriage, Jesus turns his attention to children. The child is literally the one flesh, the one body procreated by the two parents—literally and physically, genetically. The two becoming one flesh, is not merely the union of two persons, the man and the woman, but also their child.¹

I've heard it suggested that *"we have devalued what is literally the most creative thing we can do, procreation; that creating children is more creative than creating any art or science or culture or civilization because its product is the only thing in the universe that will outlive the universe itself. It is a person, the only thing in the universe that God loves for its own sake."*² I think that's worth considering.

Through the years, I've talked with enough parents to know that there's always fear associated with having children, whether it's your first or tenth. But I've also learned from parents and from observation, that it always works somehow. There's enough to go around and life becomes more beautiful because of that child that was momentarily a cause for fear. I've never heard a parent say, *"You know, we've got these six kids, but I gotta be honest, if I could do it all over again, I wish we only had four"*.

As I've likely said to you before, we all have fears and some of them are irrational. It's ironic that it takes childlike trust in God the Father in order to be open to having a child (or another child). Parents, open to life, are indeed childlike, trusting that God the Father will provide for any more children he may send them.³

But given the three things that Jesus talks about in this wince-inducing Gospel—marriage, divorce and children—I recall, years ago, a man I didn't know approached me after Mass. He said that his wife was divorcing him and that they had children. He was angry and hurt, continuing to hope that somehow, she would change her mind or see that she is obliged to try to make it work. He also told me that he was angry about priests who simply tell people that it's okay to walk away from marriage as long as you get an annulment before entering into another relationship. He wanted me to know that priests need to lovingly challenge people when it comes to thoughts of leaving their marriage. I took his message to heart, even as I acknowledge that sometimes there sadly seems to be no way to save a marriage, and furthermore, one must run from a spouse who is dangerous and destructive.

There's a lot to be said about what causes marriages to fail, but I find myself considering the following two things I share with couples who are preparing for marriage.

First, nurture your marriage with regularity and intentionality. Every couple years, go on a couples retreat to reset and remember what you pledged on your wedding day, to remember what marriage demands, but also what beauty it can be. Along with that first point, get help when you need it. Don't assume it will work itself out on its

¹ Kreeft, Peter. *Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle B) (Food for the Soul Series Book 2)*. Word on Fire. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid*.

³ Bergsma, John. *The Word of the Lord: Reflections on the Sunday Mass Readings for Year B*. Emmaus Road Publishing. Kindle Edition.

own. Seek objective and trustworthy counsel when it feels like it's falling apart. Children aren't afraid to ask for help, and Jesus tells us that we are to be like children.

Second, don't make it all about your children, as perhaps too many couples do. Yes, love your children that God entrusts to you and take good care of them, but don't make everything about their immediate whims, nor every want they express. It distorts their humility and perspective, but also it will likely cause you to lose sight of your spouse. Your marriage comes first, and nurturing it will inevitably give way to good care for children.

Exercising our priestly office, let us pray with intentionality that those who are divorced never feel anything but love from our Lord, his Church and each of us. Let us pray for those who continue to bear wounds that come from failed marriages. But let us also pray that married couples turn toward the sources of grace and strength. Let us pray for those who desire children, but for reasons beyond our understanding, that gift has not been granted to them, and for those who experience moments of exasperation in caring for the children God has entrusted to them.

I don't believe I'm being an alarmist in saying that there's a crisis of marriage in our culture—and we Catholics are not removed from it. *What's at stake?* It's more than just your personal happiness or peace in your home. It's something much bigger, something that affects all of society and its well-being. Further, I believe that if we want our children to truly find happiness and meaning in their lives, we need to rediscover marriage—how it *was* an integral part of creation, how it *is* an integral part of ongoing creation, how it *is* so deeply associated with God's plan for us all.